PERSPECTIVES

Security Assistance Engagement Plan Development

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Introduction

After reviewing many security assistance organization (SAO) engagement plans in the course of conducting joint general inspections, I have found there is no consistent approach to the practice of developing them. Security assistance organizations generally devote considerable time and effort in crafting a plan that describes their efforts, whether or not there is any interest from the rest of the country team. In some cases, development of the SAO engagement plan, like the embassy's mission program plan, is primarily an exercise in compliance with regulations that require it to be prepared. This tends to be a rather sterile drill that wastes man hours and results in a piece of paper that is stuck in a safe until it is dragged out and modified the next time a submission is due. Some SAOs put greater store in their engagement plans, and try to use them as navigation aids as they conduct day-to-day business. However, even when the engagement plan occupies a central position in the functioning of an SAO, certain aspects of the way the staff approaches the development process and the articulation of goals and objectives limits the plan's usefulness and influence. This article will set forth some ideas and tips that can help the SAO produce an engagement plan that is more than just a piece of paper.

The Process of Strategy

The first thing to understand about the engagement plan is that it constitutes a piece of strategy. In terms of the host nation, the SAO engagement plan is aimed at having national level effects. The engagement plan is therefore fundamentally different than the tactical operations plans military officers are used to dealing with. Most engagement plans cover at least a year, and their main goals tend to be very broad. They frequently aim at political outcomes rather than military objectives. All of these characteristics clearly denote engagement plans as strategic documents, and their development should be treated accordingly.

One of the first principles of strategy is that the process is more important than the product. Analysis of why powers such as Germany and Japan went down to defeat reveals a defective process of developing strategy. The right people did not talk to each other; barriers to communication kept critical information from key decision makers, and plans, once developed, were not subject to periodic and objective review. Any strategy or plan is only valid until the next engagement. It must then be reexamined and modified if necessary.

What this means for the SAO is that the engagement plan should be considered the result of a process and not an end in itself. First, the SAO should be closely involved in the preparation of the embassy's mission program plan. The SAO should look for ways it can support each of the embassy's goals, whether they have an obvious connection with the military or not. In an ideal world, the ambassador and country team would regard the SAO as a flexible and responsive resource that could contribute to policy goals in a wide variety of ways. "Staying in your lane" is a fine principle to follow on the battlefield to prevent friendly fire casualties, but that mentality can inhibit the creative approach to strategy development that is necessary for optimum integration with the country team. This, to be sure, is not a prescription to break other agencies' rice bowls in a way that creates animosity and tension. Instead, it is a call to broaden the SAO perspective on how it can contribute to the ambassador's strategy.

Another aspect of the strategy process is the interchange with the host nation military and ministry of defense. In some cases, the SAO will be developing its engagement plan in the context of a host nation that has a viable national security strategy of its own. If this strategy, and the individual service strategies are acceptable to the U.S., then the engagement plan process is simply a matter of knowing and understanding their strategy and developing realistic ways to support it. However, many nations do not have a well-developed national security strategy process, and the engagement plan will be developed in a sort a vacuum with respect to the host nation. In either case, the SAO must work closely with the DAO to develop an understanding of who the right people are to listen to in the host nation.

Writing the Plan

Once the SAO's place in the mission program plan is solidified, and constructive relations with key country team members and host nation officials are established, development of the engagement plan can move forward. The plan must support both the mission program plan and the CINC theater strategy. These two documents do not normally conflict, so this should present few difficulties. Moreover, SAOs do a consistently good job of deciding what elements should compose that engagement strategy. What seems to be more problematic is being able to articulate the strategy in a way that provides useful guidance over the course of the plan's life. Most SAOs develop a set of specific objectives that are subordinate to and support the overall goals of the mission program plan. These objectives are almost exclusively couched in "process language", the use of verbs that do not indicate an end state, only an action. For example, engagement plans commonly contain one or more objectives related to professionalizing the host nation's military forces. The following is a generic example of such an objective: Promote the development of a highly trained and motivated professional non-commissioned officer corps. There is nothing wrong with the substance of this objective, but the way it is stated keeps it from being of much use as a guidepost as the months go by. "Promote the development of..." offers no clue as to when the objective has been attained. Even if it is followed by a list of specific activities, there is no readily discernable end point to aim for. How do you know when you are winning? Does the fact that 15 percent of the planned host nation NCO student quotas at the School of the Americas were not filled for various reasons represent a serious setback?

It is not just a matter of picking different words. There has to be a logic process that forms the basis for the articulation of strategy. One of the most powerful tools that has been developed is the vision statement. The vision statement says what you want your world to look like at the end of your planning horizon. Let us take a shot at articulating a vision statement for the military establishment of the mythical country of El Dorado:

An El Doradan defense establishment that is under the command of a fully functional ministry of defense, and not subject to inappropriate influence of military officers whose formal responsibilities exclude such influence. An El Doradan military that is professional and not corrupt, committed to protecting the constitutional process, capable of protecting the rights of its members and exerting sovereign control over the borders and territory of El Dorado.

This is by no means a template vision statement, but it does provide a feel for how things should be said. Clearly, this vision cannot be attained overnight, and will probably never be completely achieved; but it does provide us with a pole star to check the azimuth of our actions. Cascading vision statements concerning more specific elements of the main statement could be derived, like a vision statement for the El Doradan NCO corps. Specific objectives can devolve from the vision statements. However, you can not just jump to writing objectives. There is more to consider.

Here are some examples of specific objectives couched in terms of the final results desired:

• Passage of a law placing the El Doradan ministry of defense in the operational chain of command of the military.

• An operational El Dorandan counter-terrorism unit capable of conducting hostage rescue, terrorist capture, site security surveys and training additional units.

• A cadre of civilian officials who are capable of executing the functions of a ministry of defense and whose credentials inspire confidence on the part of the military.

Sometimes process language is unavoidable in cases where the objective cannot be made more specific, such as "promote understanding and respect for human rights, the rule of law and democratic processes." On-going objectives should be supported by either a specific series of periodic actions, such as participation in symposia, or a list of indicators that reveal whether progress is being made, such as the appointment of a human rights council in the host nation army.

Once a set of specific objectives, couched in results-oriented language, have been crafted, concrete actions can be identified to achieve them. The set of objectives, along with their attendant actions, constitute the meat of the engagement plan.

Classifying Events and Actions

Military events in a campaign will have certain relationships to each other that have implications for strategy. This is also true with regard to objectives, actions and events prescribed by an SAO engagement plan. These relationships can be categorized as follows:

• Decisive Event. These are events such as major battles that have a decisive effect on strategy. Loss of a major battle may mean the war is lost, or at least that the loser must change his strategy. The main thing about a decisive event is that the commander must tightly orchestrate all elements necessary for success so that when the battle is finally joined, he has maximized his chances for victory. This means close focus on intelligence to assess, as the event draws closer, whether the various elements are lining up properly. The commander must know what conditions are required for a successful outcome and ensure those conditions are created before engagement.

In SAO terms, objective (1) listed above calls for the achievement of a decisive event: the passage of a key law. The engagement plan would then proceed to outline the various factors, such as overt support by key army officials, that need to be lined up in order for the bill to pass. Periodic checks of these factors would reveal how things were going and provide insight into what kinds of actions and additional support would be necessary in the future.

• Sequential Series of Events - In this relationship, Event A precedes and is prerequisite to Event B, and so forth until the last event brings about strategic success. Objective (2) described above might need a specific sequence of events to occur in order to assure success. For instance:

Task 1: Obtain approval from the Ministry of Defense for creation of a counterterrorist (CT) unit (to be completed by Jul 2002).

Task 2: Create, in conjunction with the host nation military, a set of criteria and characteristics of the proposed CT unit (Sep 2002).

Task 3: Send six students to CT/ related training at the School of the Americas (SOA) (Oct 2002 - Feb 2003).

Task 4: Schedule two Joint Combined Exercises for Training to conduct initial stand-up training for the unit (Apr 2003)

Task 5: Obtain participation by the newly formed host nation CT unit in a SOUTHCOM multinational CT exercise (Jul 2003).

Failure or delays in one task would have a cascading effect on following tasks and replanning would be necessary.

• Cumulative Series of Events - In this case, events are only related insofar as their effects are additive. This is normally what SAOs generate in their engagement plans, when they have any specific measures of effectiveness at all. For instance, Objective (3) might be supported by taskings that call for specific numbers of Extended International Military Education and Training (E-IMET) students in the coming year and participation in a certain number of symposia by university or think-tank civilians. What is important is the total number over time in order to achieve some kind of "critical mass" of education or opinion.

Another cumulative objective might call for the increase in professionalism in the host nation NCO corps. There is nothing wrong with this as far as it goes, but the numbers should not just be pulled out of a hat or be based on what appears feasible. There should be an identifiable cause-and-effect relationship between the numbers and projected achievement of the objective.

If, for instance, the objective is to develop a corps of NCOs who are capable of assuming at least platoon command in the absense of an officer, and there are about 2000 NCOs in the host nation army, then in lieu of any other training, an SOA quota of 5 students per year is too small to make a difference. It is not that sending five host nation NCOs to SOA is a bad thing; it is just not going to achieve the objective. The SAO would have to look at a "train the trainer" approach to establishing a host nation NCO academy. The other challenge is to decide when not making numbers affects strategy. If you can establish a cause-and-effect linkage between the numbers and

the objective, then the significance of a certain number of no-shows or drop outs may become apparent.

Executing Strategy

Once the engagement plan is complete, just remember, it is not complete; it never is. What it has done is given the SAO a clearly defined destination and a road map to get there. However, as the SAO gets caught up in the "tyranny of the in box," it is easy to introduce drift into its navigation system, so periodic azimuth checks are in order. It is probably sufficient to perform a major strategy review once or twice a year; doing it more frequently would not allow enough events to transpire to give visibility to long term trends. However, quarterly assessments of how effectively and efficiently the SAO is executing its strategy are a good idea.

Another benefit to this way of operating is that it promotes good communications within the embassy, and the country team is more likely to become an organism that is capable of learning. Periodic formal or informal discussions have more utility, and information that previously might have been ignored or dismissed will now be seen for its true significance. Also, it is simply more fun and intellectually more satisfying to operate this way.

The whole point of this article is to urge SAOs to make strategic thinking an institutionalized way of doing business. The engagement plan is simply a pivot point for this process. If we remain slaves to our in-box, if we do not form the habit of discussing our potential plans and objectives with people who count, if we do not take the time to figure out exactly where we want to go, and if we do not periodically assess our azimuth and rate of advance, we inevitably become opportunists who walk blindly into unknown territory. We may experience success or we may suffer setbacks, but either way it will not be because we knew what we were doing.

About the Author

Captain Rubel, a native of Rockford, Illinois, is currently Deputy Dean, Center for Naval Warfare Studies. He received his commission from the NROTC Unit at the University of Illinois, where he graduated in 1971 with a bachelors degree in psychology. He earned his Naval Aviator wings in 1973 and reported to Attack Squadron 66 at Cecil Field, Florida after six months of A-7 Corsair II training. On this tour he participated in 6th Fleet operations aboard USS Independence (CV-62) during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Cyprus Crisis in 1974. In 1976 he became an instructor pilot in Attack Squadron 174.

Reporting to Commander, Carrier Air Wing SEVEN as the staff Landing Signal Officer, he made two cruises aboard USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69). During the second cruise, the ship-air wing team was deployed to the Indian Ocean for eight months in support of U.S. policy in the 1980 Iranian Hostage Crisis.

Selected to attend the Spanish Naval War College in Madrid, Spain, Captain Rubel attended the Defense Language Institute for seven months of Spanish instruction and subsequently spent a year in Spain studying the Spanish way of war.

After A-7 refresher training, Captain Rubel reported to Attack Squadron 86 as a department head. Deploying to the Mediterranean aboard USS Nimitz (CVN-68), he participated in naval operations in conjunction with the TWA Flight 847 crisis.

In 1985 Captain Rubel began a year of study at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. After graduation, he remained on the faculty until June, 1988.

Selected for command, Captain Rubel underwent six months of F/A-18 training at NAS Cecil Field and reported as Executive Officer, Strike Fighter Squadron 131. He assumed command in June, 1990. Again embarked in USS Eisenhower, his squadron participated in the early deterrent operations during Operation Desert Shield. He relinquished command in September 1991 and again reported to the Naval War College faculty, where he served until June, 1996.

From June, 1996 to June, 1998 he served as Inspector General, U.S. Southern Command. Upon completion of that assignment he returned to the Joint Military Operations faculty of the Naval War College where he holds the Colin Powell Chair of Joint Warfare.